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Reshaping Values for Your Own Good: Subjectivity and Objectivity in Well-Being

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1. Subjectivism and Objectivism

This paper outlines a subjectivist theory of well-being that can provide objective axiological guidance to well-being. Very roughly, the well-being of a person is the degree to which life goes well for the person, and subjectivist theories propose that the well-being of a person is grounded in the person's subjective attitudes, such as desiring, enjoying, or believing to be good.[1] To take the desire fulfillment theory (the most popular version of subjectivism in the recent literature), life goes well for you to the extent your desires are fulfilled.[2] For example, if it is your desire to achieve something at work, then your achievement at work makes life go well for you to that extent; but it does not make life go any better for you if you do not have that desire. Since different people have different desires—whether they are possessions, activities, or personal relations—different conditions make life go well for different people. This point even applies to pleasure. According to the desire fulfillment theory, pleasurable sensory experience makes life go well for you if you have desire for it, but it does not if you have no desire for it.[3] Of course, most people have desire for pleasure, so pleasure makes life go well for most people. However, if you happen to be an ascetic with no interest in the quality of your sensory experience, pleasure makes no difference to your well-being.

[1] See Raibley (2024) and Frugé (2022) for different ways of distinguishing subjectivism from objectivism in the theory of well-being.
[2] To express the idea in the negative form, life goes *badly* for you to the extent your desires are *frustrated*.
[3] Some terminological caution is necessary here. If pleasure is defined by the person's positive attitude toward it, as in attitudinal hedonism (Feldman 2004), or formulated in a way that is reducible to desires (Heathwood 2006; 2007), then the pleasure-based theory of well-being is a version of subjectivism.

Objectivists, on the other hand, assert that certain conditions make life go well for any person regardless of their subjective attitude toward them. Knowledge and friendship are among the conditions that are frequently mentioned. They do not deny that well-being is relative to the person in an obvious way. For example, it is your knowledge—and not somebody else's knowledge—that makes life go well for you. Most of our subjective attitudes are also relative to the person in the same way. For example, it is your achievement—and not somebody else's achievement—that you desire and thus makes life go well for you. What distinguishes subjectivism from objectivism is not whether well-being is relative to the person in this way, but whether the basis of evaluation is the person's subjective attitude, such as desiring, enjoying, or believing to be good. Given this characterization, subjectivists need not deny that the well-being of a person is an objective fact because the person's having a positive attitude toward some condition is itself an objective fact. For example, if it is an objective fact that you desire an achievement at work, and your achievement at work is also an objective fact, then it is an objective fact (by the combination of the two facts) that life goes well for you to that extent, according to the desire fulfillment theory.

Both subjectivism and objectivism have weaknesses that are widely known. Two major weaknesses of objectivist theories of well-being are alienation and arbitrariness. The problem of alienation arises when you do not have a positive attitude toward some conditions of well-being claimed by objectivists: Why do such conditions make life go well for you? As Peter Railton puts it, "It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any way to engage him." (Railton 1986, p. 9)[4] The problem of alienation would be alleviated by a clear and compelling explanation as to why certain conditions make life go well for you regardless of your subjective attitude, but there then arises the second problem of objectivism—arbitrariness. Many objectivists list conditions of well-being with no overarching principle to unify them, and they disagree among themselves on the conditions to include in the list.[5] To their opponents it looks like each objectivist is insisting on their own preference—shaped by their personal history in some cultural setting—as objectively valid.[6] It seems arbitrary to adopt one of such lists and apply it to everyone.

Subjectivism also has weaknesses, of which the most serious is the inability to provide axiological guidance. The problem arises when your subjective attitude, such as desiring, enjoying, or believing to be good, is defective (Heathwood 2005). For example, people who only care for indolence and indulgence seem to be missing out on many good things in life.

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[4] The requirement of non-alienation is also called "the resonance constraint" (Dorsey 2017).

[5] Subjectivists also disagree among themselves on how best to formulate the subjectivist theory of well-being, but they need not fight over what conditions (such as knowledge and friendship) make life go well because the conditions of well-being are different for different people, according to subjectivism. It may be suggested that the conditions listed by different objectivists overlap considerably, and that there is no *deep disagreement* (Fogelin 2005) among them that cannot be resolved. However, this is in part because most of the objectivists in the discussion of well-being (in academic publication in English) share similar backgrounds. I expect, for example, that a Buddhist monk in Zen monastery would endorse a radically different list with strong emphasis on *non-attachment*.

[6] This point also applies to the "perfectionist" version of objectivism (Hurka 1993; Foot 2003), viz. it looks as though each perfectionist is insisting on their own conception of human perfection—shaped by their personal history in some cultural setting—as objectively valid.

Subjectivism does allow for instrumental guidance on how to attain the subjectively determined conditions of well-being. Subjectivism also allows for guidance on how to choose the conditions to pursue for maximizing your overall well-being. For example, pursuing some desires may be bad for your overall well-being because it prevents the fulfillment of your more important desires. But this is still instrumental guidance on which of the desired conditions to pursue for maximizing your well-being, and not the axiological guidance on what conditions to desire. Subjectivism seems to leave no room for axiological guidance to correct defective subjective attitudes because it is subjective attitudes themselves that determine the conditions of well-being.

In short, both subjectivism and objectivism have serious problems to overcome: Objectivism seems alienating and arbitrary while subjectivism seems unable to provide axiological guidance. There have been attempts at reconciliation, but the problem persists. For example, some objectivists incorporate attitude-dependent conditions as one component of well-being. Those theories can still provide axiological guidance to claim that some subjective attitudes are defective based on the attitude-independent components of well-being. However, those attitude-independent components seem alienating and arbitrary. Some "hybrid theories" go further in this direction to propose that the conditions of well-being must be *both* taken to be good by the person subjectively *and* good objectively.[7] The first conjunct (taken to be good by the person subjectively) makes the conditions of well-being non-alienating, while the second conjunct (good objectively) allows the theory to provide axiological guidance when the attitude (believing to be good) is defective. However, the problem of arbitrariness remains about the selection of objectively good conditions. The theory is also alienating in that conditions you desire, enjoy, or believe to be good may not be included in the conditions of your well-being because they are not objectively good. These attempts at compromise fail for the same reason. Any theory that provides axiological guidance by treating some subjective attitudes as defective for your own well-being seems alienating and arbitrary for that reason.

This paper proposes a resolution of this problem in favor of subjectivism, but not in the way done by the leading subjectivist theory of well-being—the informed desire theory. According to the informed desire theory, the conditions of your well-being are the conditions you would desire if you were fully informed. Unfortunately, the counterfactual identification of the conditions (you *would* value if …) brings back the problem of alienation (Griffin 1986, Ch. 1; Sobel 1994). Why do conditions you do not actually desire, enjoy, or believe to be good make life go well for you? I will take up the informed desire theory in Section 3 and acknowledge the role it can play when we formulate axiological guidance to well-being, but I also argue there that what counts for your well-being in the end are conditions you actually desire, enjoy, or believe to be good. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 makes some remarks on the method of inquiry. Section 3 endorses concurrent dual subjectivism as a theory of well-being. It is then pointed out in Section 4 that concurrent dual subjectivism can provide objective axiological guidance to well-being without alienation and arbitrariness. Section 5 addresses some

[7] As one hybrid theorist puts it, well-being amounts to "enjoying the good" (Kagan 2009). See Woodard (2015) for an overview of different versions of the hybrid theory.

likely concerns, and Section 6 concludes the paper with some remarks on further issues to investigate.

2. Remarks on the Method

This section describes the method of inquiry adopted in this paper. I do not offer an extended defense of the method here. The main point of the section is to spell it out upfront to make the subsequent discussions more intelligible to the reader, especially where my approach differs from the conventional one. The most important difference is the role of intuitive judgments. It is common in the literature on well-being to consider some hypothetical scenarios and ask whether life goes well for the person in the scenario. An adequate theory of well-being is supposed to deliver verdicts that agree with our intuitive judgments. Some practitioners of this approach grant that the intuitive judgments are defeasible, for example, if it is incoherent with other intuitive judgments or contradicts plausible general principles, but the intuitive judgments carry considerable weight in their assessment of the theories. I take a different approach in which intuitive judgments play no role in the assessment of competing theories. Part of the reason is cultural and linguistic differences. I am familiar enough with English and the mindsets of typical English speakers to play the game of intuition in English, but I do not take it seriously as a way of doing axiology. The conceptions of a good life are strikingly different in some populations, especially outside the English-speaking world. But the main reason is epistemic: I doubt that any humans—whatever their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are—have a special epistemic access through their intuition to the axiological truth.

There are two clarifications needed. First, many conjectures that drive inquiries originate from the researcher's intuitions, and some of those intuitions may be about hypothetical scenarios. I have no objection to starting an inquiry in that way, but that is different from an assessment of competing theories. Hans Reichenbach (1938) introduced the well-known distinction in philosophy of science between the *context of discovery* (where we come up with scientific hypotheses) and the *context of justification* (where we evaluate the proposed scientific hypotheses). Some people extend the distinction to epistemology in general (Shogenji 2018, Ch. 1), but there is no reason to stop there. We can distinguish the *context of conjecture* and the *context of assessment*—as I prefer to call them—and apply the distinction to any theoretical inquiries, including theories of well-being. In an inquiry into well-being, it is fine to consult intuitions in the context of conjecture (where we come up with hypotheses about well-being) but not in the context of assessment (where we evaluate the proposed hypotheses about well-being). When I mention some hypothetical scenarios in the subsequent discussions, it is for the purpose

of motivating some direction of inquiry or illustrating certain points, and not for assessing competing theories.[8]

The second clarification is about *conceptual anthropology*. I do not object to the project of describing the ways some concepts are used in some population—sometimes by asking their intuitive judgments in various hypothetical scenarios. So, the conceptual anthropology of well-being is fine, and clarifying the ways some population uses certain axiological concepts is often helpful, for example, when you work with people whose axiological concepts differ from yours significantly. However, the conceptual anthropology of well-being is not the axiology of well-being—as I understand it in this paper—that aims to guide our life. You need not guide your life by the ways some concepts are used in some population even if the concepts are axiological.

Once we set aside the context of conjecture and conceptual anthropology, there is no need to consult intuitions. But then how do we adjudicate competing conceptions of well-being? One possible answer is conceptual engineering.[9] The idea is easy to understand in the case of scientific concepts. When we make some concepts precise for scientific purposes, we choose precisifications that serve the goal of science best—very roughly, the goal is to formulate theories that can explain and predict observations. If some precisifications serve this goal well, we may adopt them even if they do not accord well with some of our intuitions. Unfortunately, we cannot formulate axiological concepts in the same way because their primary role is not to explain and predict observations, but to guide our life. We may occasionally use axiological concepts for explanation and prediction, but that is not their primary role. When explanation and prediction are not the primary goal, we may formulate some concepts to make them contribute to certain axiological goals, for example, to articulate social categories so that they serve the goal of social justice better (Haslanger 2000). But we cannot take this approach to the concept of well-being because well-being is a final goal and not a means for achieving some further goal. We may be able to evaluate some other concepts by the way they contribute to well-being,[10] but we cannot evaluate the concept of well-being itself in that way.

So, the aim here is not to formulate the concept of well-being such that it serves some further goal well. Instead the aim is to formulate the concept of well-being such that (a) it provides good reasons for the person to achieve it, and (b) it indicates effective ways of achieving it.[11] These are general considerations in formulating axiological concepts that guide our life, and they point to the initial advantage of subjectivism over objectivism. The point (a) relates to non-alienation, that is, the person has good reasons (with no alienation) to achieve the conditions toward which the person has a pro-attitude. To underscore this point I characterize subjectivism not just by desires but by pro-attitudes in general. So, the proposal of subjectivism

[8] It is not always clear whether intuitions in hypothetical scenarios are used for motivation and illustration or for assessing competing theories. See Climenhaga (2018) on the question of whether intuitions are used as evidence in the philosophical literature.

[9] See Isaac, Koch & Nefdt (2022) for a recent review of the growing literature on conceptual engineering.

[10] For example, Barnes (2016) proposes to revise the traditional concept of disability so that it serves the goal of improving the well-being of disabled people better.

[11] Unlike scientific concepts, the concept of well-being need not be exact (at least at this stage of inquiry) provided it has these two attributes.

is that life goes well for a person to the extent the world matches the conditions the person *values*, where to value some conditions means to have a pro-attitude toward them whether it is desiring, enjoying, or believing to be good. Meanwhile, objectivism in its typical formulation proposes that a person's life goes well for the person to the extent the person meets a list of conditions, such as knowledge, friendship, etc. But objectivism in this formulation does not provide good reasons for achieving well-being, that is, the theory is alienating for those who do not value the conditions in the list.

It is possible to formulate objectivism without a list of conditions; for example, life goes well for the person to the extent the person's conditions are objectively good for the person. But objectivism in this formulation without a list of specific conditions does not indicate effective ways of achieving well-being, which is the point (b) above, because it does not say what the objectively good conditions are or how we can identify them once we set aside intuitions in the context of assessment. In contrast, subjectivism indicates effective ways of achieving well-being because we can identify the person's values from their statements of values and the way they behave under various conditions. These means of identification are not infallible, but if there are competing hypotheses on the person's values, we can gather further evidence to see which hypothesis is the most plausible given the total evidence, as we do in any empirical inquiry. In short, we can understand the strengths of subjectivism in theoretical terms based on (a) and (b).

This leaves us with the problem of axiological guidance: Subjectivist theories of well-being seem unable to provide axiological (as distinguished from instrumental) guidance on what conditions we should value for our well-being. There are two possible responses to this problem. One is to dismiss it: Theories of well-being that are not alienating and not arbitrary cannot provide axiological guidance. If we take this stance, then someone's subjective values are defective only for other reasons, for example, for moral reasons (whatever that means). The conjecture that some pro-attitudes are axiologically defective for your own good is then mistaken. The other possible response is to take the conjecture of defective pro-attitudes seriously and seek a version of subjectivism that can provide axiological guidance to well-being. That is the approach I take in this paper, but since it is a conjecture that your pro-attitudes can be defective for your own good, I would settle for subjectivism without axiological guidance if the search for that kind of subjectivism fails. Having made these remarks on the method, readers who favor the intuition-based approach to well-being may still find the paper useful. They can take it to be an attempt to accommodate three major lines of intuition about the concept of well-being—not alienating, not arbitrary, and the ability to provide axiological guidance—though there will be no fine-tuning of the concept that accommodates intuitive judgements in hypothetical scenarios.

3. Concurrent Dual Subjectivism

This section describes concurrent dual subjectivism as a theory of well-being. We will see in the next section that this theory can provide axiological guidance without being alienating or

arbitrary. My point of departure is the informed desire theory (also known as the ideal desire theory). The informed desire theory comes in various forms, but my focus here is how the theory tries to explain axiologically defective pro-attitudes. According to the informed desire theory, the conditions of your well-being are the conditions you would desire if you were fully informed. The idea is natural. Informed desire theory is a version of desire satisfaction theory whose strength is that it is non-alienating. The theory then addresses the problem of defective values by introducing the qualification "informed". The information relevant here is not information about how to achieve the desired conditions, but about those conditions themselves, that is, whether you would desire them if you were fully informed about the conditions. For example, you may not enjoy the food you desire when it is in your mouth. Conversely, you may enjoy some novel food, for which you currently have no desire. These cases indicate that fulfilling your *actual* desires is neither sufficient nor necessary for your well-being. The informed desire theory proposes that the conditions of your well-being are conditions you *would* desire if you were fully informed. Your actual desires can be defective in the light of your informed desires, and not in the light of some objective values.

It is an attractive theory, but the key insight just noted— you may not value what you desire once you are in the desired conditions—points to a simpler way of handling cases of misinformation: The conditions of your well-being are conditions you value when you are in the conditions. More carefully, the values that determine the conditions of your well-being are the values you have when you are *aware* of the conditions because you may remain misinformed if you are unaware of the conditions that hold.[12] A key feature of this alternative to the informed desire theory is the avoidance of the counterfactual conditional—you *would* value if you *were* fully informed—that invites the suspicion that the informed desire theory is alienating after all because what you do not actually value cannot improve your well-being. The alternative proposal states that the conditions of your well-being are the conditions you actually value when you are aware of them. The resulting theory is concurrent dual subjectivism, which I formulate as follows:

> Life goes well for person *p* at time *t* to the extent the conditions of the world that *p* is aware of at *t* match the conditions that *p* values at *t*.[13]

The theory is subjectivist in two ways. First, the values relevant to your well-being are your subjective values, instead of some objective values. Second, the conditions relevant to your well-

[12] The awareness requirement is often endorsed on the ground that it is counterintuitive for the conditions you are unaware of to affect your well-being, but the reason for the awareness requirement here is the possible persistence of misinformation when you are unaware of the conditions. See the exchange between Griffin (1986, Ch. 1) who argues against the "experience requirement" of well-being and Sumner (1996, Ch. 5) who responds to Griffin in defense of the requirement.

[13] Some authors have defended similar views on different grounds. See Sumner's (1996) life satisfaction theory, Feldman's (2004) attitudinal hedonism, and Heathwood's (2005; 2006) concurrent desire-fulfillment theory.

being are the conditions you are aware of, instead of the conditions that hold objectively (possibly unbeknownst to you).[14]

Concurrent dual subjectivism is similar in substance to the informed desire theory. Both stay away from objective values in favor of subjectivism, and both explain defective values by misinformation about the values of the conditions. However, concurrent dual subjectivism extends the subjectivist response to the alienation problem in a natural way. Subjectivism proposes to avoid alienation by relativizing the conditions of well-being to different people, that is, the conditions of well-being are different for different people because different people value—and are motivated to attain—different conditions. Concurrent dual subjectivism extends this idea further to relativize the conditions of well-being to different times of your life, that is, the conditions of well-being are different at different times of your life because you value—and are motivated to attain—different conditions at different times of your life.[15] This understanding of concurrent dual subjectivism points to an advantage of this theory over the informed desire theory. The informed desire theory works fine in cases where you come to *recognize* your existing desires (as in the food cases above) but it is questionable in cases where your desires change over time, for example, due to relocation, new friends, marriage, serious illness, aging, etc. Even your desires for food can change over time (as in the case of "acquired taste"). If there have been changes in your values, some of your past desires are alienating to you now, just as some of other people's desires are alienating to you.

The informed desire theorists may respond with some accounts of change in desires, but they fall short in one way or another. One possible account is to deny change in informed desires, that is, only actual desires can change.[16] If you retain the same informed desires throughout your life, then the informed desires are never alienating. This suggestion is dubious on empirical grounds and contrary to the spirit of subjectivism—that is, it is analogous to (though not as extreme as) suggesting that all people would share the same desires if they were fully informed. There is no good reason for denying that a well-informed person can have different values at different times. You may have a desire for beer now, but you didn't when you were five years old, and that is not due to a lack of information. Your experiences shaped and reshaped your desires, which should be distinguished from coming to recognize your existing desires. I will therefore set aside the suggestion that all changes in desires are due to misinformation.

Another way the informed desire theorists may account for changes in value is to make the relation between the conditions of well-being and the desires under full information

[14] Awareness implies truth. For example, if you are *aware* that it is snowing outside, then it is snowing outside. l will take up the question in Section 5 whether the requirement of *awareness* can be weakened to *belief* that does not imply truth.

[15] For the purpose of concurrent dual subjectivism, "a time of your life" is a stretch of time during which your values remain the same and your awareness relevant to the values also remains the same. It need not be a moment with no temporal extension.

[16] Pettigrew (2019, Ch. 5) calls this view of change in values "One True Utility Solution" (and rejects it).

indirect.[17] According to the informed *adviser* theory, the conditions of your well-being are not simply the conditions you would desire under full information, but the conditions that your fully informed self would advise your actual self to desire. Your fully informed self would consider your actual circumstances and personal history before advising you (your actual self) on the conditions of your well-being at the time. In this way the theory relativizes the conditions of well-being to different times of your life, instead of proposing the same conditions of well-being throughout your life. On closer examination, however, this suggestion begs the question of well-being. When your fully informed self advises your actual self, the advice is meant to improve the well-being of your actual self. But without some conception of well-being already in place, it is not possible to determine whether the advice will achieve this or not. As a result, the informed adviser theory cannot stand on its own as a theory of well-being. It is of no use to say that it is what your informed self would *desire* your actual self to desire that determines the conditions of well-being. This is because the adviser's desire cannot be any desire they happen to have—it must be a desire to improve the well-being of your actual self, and this means that your fully informed self must turn to some conception of well-being that is already in place. To clarify my point, the informed adviser theory works fine as a guide to well-being once we plug in some concept of well-being, for example, the one provided by concurrent dual subjectivism. It will indeed improve your well-being if you attain conditions that your fully informed self would advise your actual self to desire, assuming that the advice is based on the sound concept of well-being.[18]

As mentioned already, the informed desire theory runs into difficulties because it tries to solve the problem of defective values by the counterfactual condition of being fully informed. The counterfactual condition brings back the problem of alienation, and the theory becomes complicated to deal with the problem. There is in contrast no problem of alienation in concurrent dual subjectivism because the conditions of your well-being at any time are conditions you actually value at that time. There is, however, a worry that the theory may have a different problem of motivation: If your well-being is relativized to times of your life, you may not be motivated to act for your future well-being, especially if your future well-being can be attained only by sacrificing your current well-being. Well-being that is relativized to times of your life makes acting for your future well-being like acting for somebody else's well-being. What motivates your current self to act for your future self? An immediate response to this worry is that you currently value your future well-being, and this makes you motivated to act for your future well-being now. The situation is similar to altruism: Altruistic people are motivated to act for other people's well-being because they value other people's well-being. Of course, you may not currently value your future well-being just as some people do not value other people's well-being. But then all bets are off as far as prudence is concerned—non-prudent people may have

[17] See Railton (1986) and Rosati (1996) for informed-desire theories of this kind, though their reasons for adopting those theories are not the same as reasons we consider in this paper.

[18] The concept of an informed adviser is a theoretical idealization, but it is not completely detached from reality. An AI program of the future—that makes use of the best general information available and gathers specific information about you by asking pertinent questions—may play the role of an informed advisor for a good life.

no motivation to act for their future well-being, just as non-altruistic people may have no motivation to act for other people's well-being.

This response about the motivation for future well-being is not fully satisfactory because the analogy with altruism is incomplete. If you are altruistic—that is, you value somebody else's well-being—your action can contribute to your own well-being indirectly when you observe their well-being because the observed world then matches your altruistic value. In contrast, if you are prudent—that is, you currently value your future well-being—your current action cannot contribute to your current well-being because your current self no longer exists to observe your future well-being by the time it is achieved. The situation is more like inter-generational benevolence. The issue here is not whether you should value your future well-being, but what motivates you to act for your future well-being when you value your future well-being. Once well-being is relativized to times of your life, concurrent dual subjectivism seems to provide no motivation for your current self to act prudently even if you value your future well-being because the well-being of your current self does not improve by acting prudently. One possible response is to regard prudential motivation as a distinct category of motivation that goes beyond the motivation for time-relativized well-being, but there is a way of fitting prudential motivation into the framework of concurrent dual subjectivism.

The key here is to distinguish the time of awareness and the time of occurrence. It is noted already that you may not be aware of some conditions at the time they are attained, but the opposite is also possible—you may be aware of certain conditions at the time when the conditions do not hold. For example, awareness of the conditions may remain in the form of memory long after the conditions cease to hold. This means that the past conditions that no longer hold can still give you "retrospective momentary well-being" (Hersch & Weltman 2023, p. 6) if the conditions you are currently aware of in the form of memory match your current values. It is not that your current values retroactively improve your past well-being. Whether your past life went well or not for you at that time depends on the value you assigned at that time to the conditions you were aware of at that time. However, the value you currently assign to the past conditions, which you are aware of in the form of memory now, can affect your current well-being.

The same point also applies to the anticipation of future conditions, that is, if you are currently aware in the form of anticipation that some conditions will hold in the future and you currently value these future conditions, then the anticipated future conditions give you "expectational momentary well-being" (Hersch & Weltman 2023, p. 6).[19] In that way, life goes well for you now even though the conditions do not hold yet, and this explains your motivation to act for future conditions that you currently value—the prudent action enables you to form the anticipation that the currently valued future conditions will hold. You may even be motivated in this way to act for conditions that only hold after your death to make the anticipated posthumous conditions match your current values. Of course, your action does not make it certain that some

[19] See MacLeod & Conway (2005) for a general study (beyond clinical setting) on how the anticipation of future conditions affects well-being.

conditions will hold in the future, but high probabilities may be good enough to motivate you. In some cases, you may be motivated to act because inaction makes it certain (or highly probable) that the conditions you value will not hold in the future. You are then currently motivated to act prudently to avoid a mismatch between the anticipated conditions and the values you currently assign to the future conditions.

4. Objective Axiological Guidance

The preceding section endorsed concurrent dual subjectivism against the informed desire theory to account for change in values. The aim of this section is to show that concurrent dual subjectivism can provide objective axiological guidance. I want to start with some clarification of "defective values" for which axiological guidance is needed. Heathwood (2005) offers a classification of "defective desires" in his defense of subjectivism. First, a desire may be defective either *intrinsically* or *all things considered*. Fulfilling an intrinsically defective desire is bad in itself, while fulfilling an all-things-considered defective desire is bad only on balance, for example, it prevents the person from fulfilling more important desires. As mentioned already (Section 1), all-things-considered defective desires are not problematic for the subjectivist theory of well-being. Second, an intrinsically defective desire may be either intrinsically well-being-defective (intrinsically "welfare-defective" in Heathwood's terminology) or intrinsically defective in other ways, for example, intrinsically virtue-defective, dignity-defective, achievement-defective, etc. Only the fulfillment of a desire that is intrinsically well-being-defective lowers the person's well-being and thus is problematic for the subjectivist theory of well-being. After classifying defective desires in this way, Heathwood denies that any desires are intrinsically well-being-defective. There is then no need for axiological guidance on well-being. I do not object to the denial of intrinsically well-being-defective desires in Heathwood's sense, but I am thinking of a different type of defectiveness, that is, values that are *diachronically* defective because of changes in our values over time. I will show below that in some of these cases we need axiological guidance on what we should value.

To avoid distraction and focus on the central issue, I adopt in this section the basic temporal framework that consists of the current time and one time in the future, and you make the choice now for your future well-being. For example, you choose your career now for your later well-being in the career. I also make some simplifying assumptions. First, your future well-being is your only concern in making the choice, and the process of transition such as training needed for a career is not considered part of the future. One way to understand this assumption is that the choice you make now has no significant impact on your well-being until sometime in the future when your life becomes stable, for example, when you are already in the career of your choice, and the only value that affects your choice is the value you assign to your future well-being. The second simplifying assumption is that the degree to which you can get close to the conditions of your choice is certain, and you can attain the closest possible conditions with

certainty by following an appropriate path. It is also assumed that you will have some values with certainty once you are in those conditions. This does not mean that you (the person whose well-being is at issue) are fully informed about these facts, which is too unrealistic even for the sake of simplicity. The facts relevant to your well-being are known to the adviser who provides guidance for your future well-being. The general framework is therefore that of the informed adviser theory, where the informed adviser provides guidance that is tailored for the underinformed individual by taking their actual circumstances and personal history into consideration, except that—as discussed in the previous section—the concept of well-being itself is given by concurrent dual subjectivism.

In concurrent dual subjectivism it is change in your values—instead of the counterfactual condition—that prompts axiological guidance, but not all cases of change in values call for axiological guidance. For example, if some change in your value is anticipated, and your future well-being is your concern, then you are advised to work for the conditions you will value instead of the conditions you value now. This is still guidance on what to do for your future value, and not axiological guidance on what value you should acquire or avoid. It is when you can shape your values that axiological guidance is needed. For example, if you have two possible courses of action that will produce different conditions in the future, and what you will value in the future depends on these conditions, then you can shape the values you will have by choosing the course of action. The question arises in those cases which way you should shape your value. Concurrent dual subjectivism suggests that you should choose the conditions/values in such a way that you will value the conditions when you are in the conditions.

To illustrate the point, suppose you are considering two possible courses of life, either to be a musician or have a life of indolence and indulgence. Let's assume that if you choose to be a musician, you will have modest success, and you currently value the life of a modestly successful musician. If you choose to be indolent and indulgent, you will have a modestly hedonistic life with no stressful work (assuming you have some money) and you currently value a modestly hedonistic life with no stressful work to the same degree as you do the life of a modestly successful musician. However, your values can change once you are in the conditions of your choice. One happy—and not uncommon—scenario is that you come to value the conditions of your choice more because you are surrounded by like-minded people who reinforce your choice socially.[20] You also become well-attuned to the conditions of your choice physically and psychologically. Dissatisfaction with the chosen conditions is often due to incomplete information and unanticipated turns of events, which we are setting aside for now. There are, of course, cases where information is correct and complete, but a change in your values diminishes your satisfaction with the attained condition. As a first approximation we may understand "defective values" as values whose pursuit predictably leads to dissatisfaction due to change in values it causes. For example, even if you currently value a modestly hedonistic life of indolence and indulgence, the pursuit of that life may predictably cause change in your values to make you

[20] See the findings in Social Learning Theory, initiated by Bandura & Walters (1963), for the role of social environment in the acquisition of behavior and attitudes.

dissatisfied with it in the end. One such scenario is that when you combine indolence and indulgence, your life will become a life of passive indulgence, and you will become increasingly bored with passive indulgence, which makes your modestly hedonistic life less valuable to you. You may search for a new kind of passive indulgence—which is already against total indolence—to restore the value of the modestly hedonistic life, but you will eventually run out of new kinds of passive indulgence you can afford, to become dissatisfied with your life in the end.

Axiological guidance seems obvious in this case: You should choose the life of a musician over a life of indolence and indulgence. There are, however, some complications because no judgment of well-being in concurrent dual subjectivism is condition neutral. In what condition do you make the judgment in favor of being a musician? The answer is not your current condition because what counts for your future well-being is the value you will have in the future and not your current values. Besides, we just assumed that you currently value the two courses of life equally. It turns out you have two comparative judgments to make—one in the condition of being a musician and the other in the condition of indolence and indulgence. The first of them is not problematic. Once you become a musician, you come to value that life more—we assume—so that you will value it more than the life of indolence and indulgence, which you do not come to value more in the condition of being a musician. However, the second judgment—one you will make in the condition of indolence and indulgence—is not so straightforward. In the scenario just described, you come to value indolence and indulgence less, but you may still value it more than the life of a musician, which requires diligence and self-discipline that are greatly disvalued in the condition of indolence and indulgence.

It is not surprising that you favor different courses of life in different conditions, but in the present case where one course leads to satisfaction while the other leads to dissatisfaction, there is a sense in which the former is the better choice even if there is no condition-neutral judgment. To sort out the tangle it is helpful here to distinguish *observed* well-being and *simulated* well-being.[21] When you are in the condition of indolence and indulgence and use your values (shaped in that condition) to judge your degree of well-being as a musician, you are not making your judgment in the condition that is being judged but are judging from outside, so to speak, by observing the judged condition. This is against the idea of concurrent dual subjectivism, where it is well-being as judged in the condition itself that counts. Of course, once you are in one condition (of indolence and indulgence, for example), you cannot be in another condition (of being a musician, for example) at the same time, but you can simulate another condition—to imagine how you would judge the condition by the values you would have in the condition. It is in this sense, I propose, that the condition of being a musician is better than the condition of indolence and indulgence. You may disvalue a musician's diligence and self-discipline when you are in the condition of indolence and indulgence, but you can also see by simulation that you would come to value diligence and self-discipline in the condition of being a musician—and would be more satisfied with your life as a musician overall than being indolent

[21] See Bykvist (2010) for a similar distinction between the "horizontal" and "diagonal" comparison of well-being. I will mention my disagreement with Bykvist below on indeterminate cases of comparative judgment.

and indulgent. This makes the simulated well-being of a musician's life greater than the well-being of an indolent and indulgent life, even if the two conditions are judged in the condition of indolence and indulgence. The proposal in concurrent dual subjectivism is to use simulated well-being (as distinguished from observed well-being) in choosing a course of life.

An important consequence of the shift from observed well-being to simulated well-being is that provided the information is complete and accurate, no disagreement arises between two comparative judgments—for example, between the comparative judgment of C_1 and C_2 made in C_1 and the comparative judgment of the same pair C_1 and C_2 made in C_2. This is because the judgment does not depend on the values you have in the condition in which you compare them. It has been emphasized that no judgment in concurrent dual subjectivism is condition neutral. In the case of *observed* well-being, this means that your well-being in condition x depends on the values you have in the condition y in which you make the judgment. As a result, it is possible that your well-being in C_1 is greater than your well-being in C_2 when they are compared in C_1 while your well-being in C_2 is greater than your well-being in C_1 when they are compared in C_2. To express this formally, $W(C_2 \mid C_1) < W(C_1 \mid C_1)$ while $W(C_1 \mid C_2) < W(C_2 \mid C_2)$, where $W(x \mid y)$ is your well-being in x judged in y. However, your *simulated* well-being has the form $W(x \mid x)$, where your well-being in the condition x is judged in the condition x itself based on the values you have in x. As a result, it does not happen in the case of simulated well-being that $W(C_2 \mid C_2) < W(C_1 \mid C_1)$ when they are compared in C_1, while $W(C_1 \mid C_1) < W(C_2 \mid C_2)$ when they are compared in C_2. In fact, it is not necessary to make the comparison either in C_1 or in C_2. You can be in any condition, including your current condition, to compare the simulated well-being of C_1 and C_2.

Another important consequence of the shift from observed well-being to simulated well-being is an increase in indeterminate cases. This may seem strange at first. If there is no disagreement in the comparative judgments of simulated well-being, then what makes some cases of comparison indeterminate? Indeed, there are no cases where you regret your choice regardless of what you choose if we understand regret as follows:[22]

> Given set $\{C_1, \ldots, C_n\}$ of possible conditions to choose from, you regret choosing C_i iff $W(C_i \mid C_i) < W(C_j \mid C_j)$ for some j.

However, the shift from observed well-being to simulated well-being does not eliminate the possibility that each of two or more choices you can make will be *ratified*, where ratification is understood by the absence of regret as follows:

> Given set $\{C_1, \ldots, C_n\}$ of possible conditions to choose from, the choice of C_i is ratified iff $W(C_i \mid C_i) < W(C_j \mid C_j)$ for no j.

[22] The use of the concept of "regret" in formal decision theory dates back to Loomes & Sugden (1982).

But why is it possible that each of two or more choices you can make will be ratified, while it is not possible that you will regret each of these choices?

Note first that the ratification of C_1 only requires that you do not regret choosing C_1, which is weaker than the requirement of valuing C_1 more than other choices. For example, where there are only two choices C_1 and C_2, the ratification of C_1 does not require that $W(C_2 \mid C_2) < W(C_1 \mid C_1)$ as long as it is not the case that $W(C_1 \mid C_1) < W(C_2 \mid C_2)$. One obvious possibility is equality, $W(C_1 \mid C_1) = W(C_2 \mid C_2)$, which makes both C_1 and C_2 ratified (you regret neither C_1 nor C_2). But equality of this kind is rare. The more common way in which neither $W(C_2 \mid C_2) < W(C_1 \mid C_1)$ nor $W(C_1 \mid C_1) < W(C_2 \mid C_2)$ is indeterminacy, which we write as $W(C_1 \mid C_1) \sim W(C_2 \mid C_2)$.[23] For example, you do not regret being a musician, but you can also see (by simulation) that you would not regret being a philosopher. It is not that the two lives are equally good, but you cannot say one is better than the other because they are good in different ways based on different values.[24] So, you may be unable to say which of the two simulated lives is better in some cases, especially when there is little overlap in values between the two axiological perspectives. This leaves some questions of well-being unanswered but not in a bad way—if there are two or more conditions that are ratified, you can choose any of them with no regret.

Against this background, we can now understand defective values in comparative terms: Your values are defective if and only if you will regret attaining the valued conditions, that is, there is some alternative condition with a greater simulated well-being. If your current values are defective in this way, then you should reshape them for your own good by choosing appropriate courses of action. This is not an abstract idea. People's values change in foreseeable ways in some circumstances. For example, placing yourself in the appropriate natural and social environment can affect your attitude toward some way of life; greater familiarity with the practice and culture of some pursuit removes apprehension and increases interest in it; and successful trials in controlled environments make you like the activities more. These strategies are helpful not only for reshaping the values of some conditions, but also for reshaping the values of activities that are needed for attaining those conditions. For example, if you aim to be a musician for your well-being, for which you need to practice diligently for an extended time, coming to like the practice itself improves your overall well-being. We can think of this as a

[23] Note that indeterminacy—unlike equality—is not transitive, that is, it does not follow from $a \sim b$ and $b \sim c$ that $a \sim c$. For example, you may prefer (a) earning \$120 to (c) earning \$110, but you may be unable to choose between earning money (of either amount) and (b) taking a day off on the beach, so that $a \sim b$ and $b \sim c$, but $a > c$ (instead of $a \sim c$). Note also that indeterminacy does not violate the condition that your assignment of values is coherent. Simulated well-beings of different conditions are still ordered without contradiction, though indeterminacy makes it a *partial ordering*.

[24] Bykvist's (2010) approach ("diagonal" comparison) resembles the comparison of simulated well-being, but Bykvist does not consider cases of indeterminacy. It seems Bykvist adheres to the traditional framework of decision theory, where your current values (including the values of the "diagonal" combinations) are the ultimate basis of decision, so that there is no case of indeterminacy (as distinguished from equality), whereas in the framework of concurrent dual subjectivism your future well-being is determined by your future values. Pettigrew (2019, Section 8.6) also disregards indeterminacy by constructing a general scale of utilities that is applicable across different axiological perspectives, but the construction requires comparisons of (differences in) utilities, part of which is made across different axiological perspectives. This is questionable in the framework of concurrent dual subjectivism.

conversion of instrumental guidance into axiological guidance. It does not just recommend some actions for achieving the conditions of well-being but recommends that you reshape values you assign to the recommended actions. Ideally, you reshape your values so that you come to like all aspects of the life you choose, including the activities you undertake to attain the conditions of well-being.

5. Addressing Some Concerns

This section addresses some likely concerns about concurrent dual subjectivism and the objective axiological guidance it provides. One of them is about the formulation of concurrent dual subjectivism: Life goes well for you (at the time) to the extent the conditions of the world *you are aware of* (at the time) match the conditions you value (at the time). It is fine from the dual subjectivist perspective that conditions you are unaware of do not affect your well-being, but the formulation may appear insufficiently subjectivist. To be thoroughly subjectivist, it seems "awareness" should be replaced by "belief" as follows: Life goes well for you (at the time) to the extent what you *believe* (at the time) to be the conditions of the world match the conditions you value (at the time). Unlike awareness, belief does not imply truth so that the conditions of the world do not affect your well-being so long as your beliefs about them match your values. This formulation makes the extent of your well-being supervenient on the state of your mind (beliefs and values) and is therefore thoroughly subjectivist. The external conditions in the world affect your well-being only indirectly through their impact on your beliefs or values. An important implication of this formulation of concurrent dual subjectivism is that you can achieve well-being by self-deception. When your beliefs do not match your values, you may simply change beliefs—by rewriting memories and daydreaming about the future—instead of changing reality or reshaping values. This may seem perverse as a way of achieving well-being, but such intuitive judgments should not be an obstacle in this paper, where intuitive judgments play no role in the assessment of competing theories.

The idea of well-being by self-deception is not out of the question if it works out with no ill effects, for example, acquiescing in self-deception by someone on their deathbed may be appropriate for their well-being if it brings them comfort and poses no harm. But well-being by self-deception is difficult to sustain for an extended time.[25] False beliefs lead to baseless expectations and misguided plans to harm your future well-being in ways you cannot paper over by self-deception, and as Clifford (1877/1999) stresses in his classic article on the ethics of belief, even an apparently harmless false belief can be combined with other beliefs to lead you

[25] The point does not apply to belief by faith, where the believers are aware of insufficient grounds for their beliefs and thus do not use the beliefs for predictions. There are also cases where false beliefs (are supposed to) have no ill effects on the person's well-being even in the long run, as in Nozick's (1974, pp. 42-45) case of an "experience machine", where a superbly programmed machine generates any (virtual) experience you want if you agree to be plugged in. However, we have good reasons to be skeptical. We cannot trust a promise of this kind so easily, and there is always a risk of malfunction (cf. Sumner 1996, p. 95).

seriously astray. Concurrent dual subjectivism is therefore formulated in terms of awareness—and not belief—to avoid the impression of promoting well-being by concocted memories and wishful thinking. However, I consider the "belief" formulation to be perfectly fine (and better than the "awareness" formulation) if it is accompanied by a clear warning against self-deception for short-term gains.

Avoiding self-deception is not the only prerequisite for sustaining conditions of well-being. Acquiring relevant knowledge of nature, society, and technology is also important, and so is staying healthy physically and psychologically. The lack of relevant knowledge or health makes it difficult to sustain almost any conditions of well-being you pursue. Recall, also, the point at the end of Section 4 on reshaping values so that you come to like all aspects of your life for greater well-being. To apply the point here, you can attain greater well-being by reshaping your values so that you come to like acquiring new knowledge and maintaining health because they are prerequisites for sustaining almost any conditions of well-being. It is therefore frequently part of the axiological guidance to well-being that you reshape values so that you come to like acquiring new knowledge and maintaining health.

Axiological guidance of this kind may prompt the suspicion that concurrent dual subjectivism admits objective conditions of well-being because it urges people to value certain activities—such as acquiring new knowledge and maintaining health—regardless of other conditions they value. This is true in some sense, that is, if we set aside unusual cases, people should value certain activities regardless of other conditions of well-being they pursue, and this may explain the inclusion of some items in the lists of conditions claimed to be good objectively, especially knowledge, though relevant knowledge you should value acquiring is different in different contexts. More importantly, the kind of objectivity involved here is different. You should value relevant knowledge, for example, not because relevant knowledge has objective value, but because valuing relevant knowledge improves your well-being as understood by concurrent dual subjectivism, that is, to achieve an agreement between activities you must engage in and activities you value. Labeling is not an issue. I would not object if some people adopted the label "objective values" for those activities people should value under diverse circumstances for their well-being, so long as well-being is understood by concurrent dual subjectivism. Regardless of the label, the point of substance is that the activities you should (almost always) value for this reason are not alienating and not arbitrary as the objectivist's conditions of well-being can be.

If anyone has concerns about the fact-value distinction at this point, there is no mystery that the guidance is both axiological and objective despite the absence of objective values. The guidance assumes that you value your future well-being and is therefore implicitly hypothetical: If you value your future well-being, then you should shape (or reshape) your values in certain ways. Of course, you can detach (in the logical sense) the value-shaping guidance from the hypothetical statement by adding the factual statement that you value your future well-being. This is no more mysterious than the detachment of the advice that you should do *q* from the hypothetical statement of prudence—if you want *p*, then you should do *q*—by the additional

premise that you want *p*. The difference is that the guidance in concurrent dual subjectivism is not what you should do (for achieving some values), but what values you should have (for your future well-being).

6. Conclusion

This paper endorsed concurrent dual subjectivism as a theory of well-being that preserves the two strengths of subjectivism—not alienating and not arbitrary—but can provide objective axiological guidance to well-being when your values are defective. The theory solves the initial puzzle: How can your values be defective for the purpose of your well-being if it is your values that determine the conditions of your well-being? The key to solving the puzzle is the observation that people's values can change over time in response to the conditions of their life. Your values can then be defective in the following way: When the conditions you value are attained, you may regret your attaining them because you no longer value them due to change in your values that is induced by these conditions, or even if you still value the attained conditions to some extent, the conditions of the world and your values would have matched better if you had attained some other conditions. When such regret is foreseeable, concurrent dual subjectivism provides axiological guidance to shape (or reshape) your values for the best match between the conditions of the world and your values. This is not instrumental guidance on the ways to attain the conditions you already value; nor is it on the ways to select the conditions to pursue (from those you already value) for the best overall results. Instead, the axiological guidance urges you to shape (or reshape) values by choosing conditions that induce appropriate values for your well-being.

Many issues remain beyond these core points. One of them is the issue of uncertainty, which was set aside in Section 4. It is commonplace that some external factors beyond your control prevent you from attaining the conditions you aim at. In consideration of such uncertainties, the standard theory of rational decision assigns probabilities to those external factors and calculates the *expected* utility (the probability-weighted average utility) for each choice to recommend the one with the highest expected utility. Additional uncertainty in the framework of concurrent dual subjectivism is what values you will have in the attained conditions. To deal with uncertainty of this kind, we may consider extending the standard theory of rational decision with an assignment of probabilities to possible values you will have in the attained conditions to calculate the expected degree of well-being for each of the conditions.[26] However, the probability-weighted assessment may be difficult in the absence of value-neutral comparison of well-being. Where there is considerable uncertainty of either kind (about attaining conditions, and about values we will have), it may be more sensible to choose a course of life that can handle uncertainty well, for example, leaving many options open and keeping your

[26] The idea is analogous to maximizing expected choiceworthiness under moral uncertainty (MacKaskill, Bykvist & Ord 2020).

values malleable. You can then find alternative conditions that are attainable and match your (reshaped) values more easily. It is part of human psychology—called "adaptive preference" in the philosophical literature—that your preference changes when the preferred condition is unattainable, but this process is usually slow and gradual. You can expedite the process by keeping your values malleable from the beginning.[27]

Another issue to consider is cross-temporal balance. I adopted the basic temporal framework in Section 4 that consists of only the current time and one time in the future with the simplifying assumption that in making choice now your only concern is your well-being in that future time. This is unrealistic because you will go through a series of temporal phases and cannot ignore your well-being at other times in the series. For example, what if you must endure a period of serious suffering to attain great conditions of well-being? You may consider the *aggregate* well-being of your whole life to make the decision—perhaps with more weight on the near future than on the distant future. You may also consider the mini-max strategy of minimizing the maximum possible loss, that is, you compare the lowest points of well-being in different scenarios and take the one with the least-bad lowest point. But it is unclear whether any of those standard approaches are applicable to cases where your values change over time with no cross-temporally applicable measure of well-being. It is ideal if you can find a scenario with no regret at any point in your life, but it is unclear how you may choose from non-ideal scenarios if there is no ideal scenario.

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[27] This is one way of understanding the concept of non-attachment that is emphasized in many Asian religions and philosophies, especially in the Buddhist traditions (Hong & Shogenji 2024). Non-attachment in this understanding does not mean that you avoid making your best efforts to attain the goal, but that you can drop the goal and change the course of life when it becomes clear the goal is unattainable. See Bruckner (2009) and Elster (1983) among others for discussions of adaptive preferences. See Gethin (1998) and Harvey (2000) among others for discussions of attachment in Buddhist ethics.

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